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ABSTRACT

This study examined preschool children's concepts of relationships with imaginary companions and real people, using the notion of social provisions, or types of social support and interactions. Four-year-olds were interviewed about social provisions--power, conflict, nurturance, and instrumental help--present in relationships with parent, best friend, and imaginary companion or sibling. Findings indicated that children differentiated relationships according to provisions. Children nurtured imaginary companions but not parents; but overall, provisions of real and imaginary friendships were similar. Statistical data were charted to show relationship partners chosen for social provisions by contrast and groups. Young children appeared to develop different schemata of relationships, which may influence their expectations of different individuals as well as their own behavior. (Author/JPB)

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Social Provisions of Real and Imaginary Relationships

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to examine preschool-aged children's concepts of relationships with imaginary companions and real people using the notion of social provisions, or types of social support/interactions. Sixty 4-year-old children (20 each with invisible friends, with personified objects—e.g., stuffed animals/dolls—or with no imaginary companion) were interviewed about the power, conflict, nurturance, and instrumental help present in relationships with parent, best friend, and imaginary companion or sibling. Results indicated that children differentiated relationships according to provisions; for example, children nurtured their imaginary companions but not their parents, but overall, provisions of real and imaginary friendships were similar. Young children thus appear to have developed differentiated schemas of relationships, including imaginary ones, which may influence their expectations of different individuals as well as their own behavior.

Introduction

- Despite the pivotal role played by relationships in social development, cognition regarding relationships in early childhood remains largely unexplored.

- Little research on imaginary companions has addressed the qualities of relationships these ethereal beings provide, although we know that relationships with invisible friends (IFs) and personified objects (POs) differ. IFs more often function as friends, whereas POs frequently require care and nurturing from their creators.

- One objective of this study was to explore early concepts of real relationships, including whether and how young children differentiate between relationships with various individuals.

- Another objective of this study was to examine children's relationships with imaginary companions in an effort to distinguish between imaginary companion types and to establish where imaginary companions fit into children's social networks.

- These objectives were addressed using Weiss's theoretical framework of social provisions, which maintains that different relationships afford different sorts of interaction and support for their members. This framework has been empirically studied by Furman & Buhrmester (1985), especially with older children.

Method

- Participants were 60 4-year-old children (mean age = 4,7; range 4,3 to 4,10) and their primary caregivers (57 mothers, 3 fathers) recruited through the Infant Participant Pool at the University of Minnesota. Families were predominantly white with married parents.

- Participants were divided into 3 groups according to companion type or absence of companion (as reported by both parent and child). Imaginary companions had been present for at least a month.

  Invisible Friends (IFs): 11 girls and 9 boys.
  Personified Objects (POs): 11 girls and 9 boys.
  Controls (children without imaginary companions): 9 girls and 11 boys.

- Through an interview based on Furman & Buhrmester's (1985) Network of Relationships Inventory, children were asked to choose between members of their social networks, presented in pairs, for four social provisions (assessed through 3 questions each):
  Nurturance: affords the child opportunities to help or care for the relationship partner
  Conflict: relationship is sometimes a source of contentiousness or anger
  Instrumental help: relationship partner assists child with tasks beyond his/her capacity
  Power: relationship partner tells the child what to do

- For each social provision, children with imaginary companions contrasted parents, best friends, and imaginary friends (whether IF or PO) and children without companions contrasted parents, best friends, and siblings. Each contrast was a forced choice between two of the three relationship partners.

- Each child answered a total of 36 questions (4 provisions X 3 questions X 3 relationship contrasts).

Example question for the social provision of nurturance:

Who do you protect and look out for? *Parent* *Best friend*

This question was asked three times: (1) parent versus best friend (depicted here), (2) parent versus sibling or imaginary companion, and (3) best friend versus sibling or imaginary companion.

Results

Each child's responses to the three questions of a social provision were aggregated into one score within each relationship contrast (e.g., parent versus best friend). When examined across children, chi-square analyses of these aggregated scores gave a sense of the connections between social provisions and relationship partners.

Differentiation of Relationships by Social Provisions

The relationship partners that children favored for each social provision are displayed in Table 1 by relationship contrast and experimental group. (Insignificant p values indicate that the choice of relationship partner did not differ statistically from chance levels.)

When examined within groups (IF, PO, or Control) and across all four social provisions at once, children differentiated between relationship partners, although the pattern of differentiation was not consistent among the groups. See Figures 1-3.

Group Comparisons

1. Comparisons among all three groups were conducted within social provision and parent-best friend relationship contrasts alone. The other relationship contrasts are not reported as they do not include the same relationships (siblings as opposed to imaginary companions).
    - *Conflict*: a marginally significant difference indicated that children with IFs most often chose best friends, control group children were divided between best friends and parents, and children with POs favored parents $\chi^2(6, 55) = 11.75, p \leq .08$.
    - *Nurturance*: controls and children with POs frequently chose parents, and children with IFs favored best friends but these results did not reach significance $\chi^2(6, 54) = 12.92, p \leq .05$.

2. Children with IFs and POs differed in their relationship partner choices for social provisions, especially within parent-best friend contrasts. Children with POs tended to choose parents for every social provision, and overall responded more consistently than children with IFs.

    Parents versus best friends
    - *Conflict*: Children with IFs most often chose best friends, and children with POs most often chose parents, $\chi^2(6, 38) = 11.43, p \leq .01$.
    - *Instrumental help*: Children with IFs favored parents, but not significantly so, but children with POs most often chose parents, $\chi^2(6, 40) = 6.76, p \leq .08$.
    - *Nurturance*: Children with POs preferred parents, and children with IFs favored best friends but not to statistically significant levels, $\chi^2(6, 35) = 9.77, p \leq .05$.

    Parents versus imaginary companions
    - *Power*: Responses of children with IFs were not significantly different from chance, but children with POs favored parents, $\chi^2(6, 39) = 6.85, p \leq .08$.

    Best friends versus imaginary companions
    - *Power*: Responses of children with POs were divided between best friends and their companions, and responses of children with IFs were insignificantly different from chance $\chi^2(6, 34) = 9.67, p \leq .05$.

Discussion

Preschool-aged children appear to be able to distinguish between the various relationships in their social networks using social provisions, meaning that they have differential schemas and expectations for different relationships even in early childhood. In addition, their ability to verbalize differences between relationships implies that they are aware of them. Moreover, social provisions can be used to describe imaginary relationships as well as real ones.

The social provisions that children associated with different relationships can be summarized as follows:

- Parents were associated with instrumental help and power, a finding which is consistent with the hierarchical nature of these relationships as well as with research on the social provisions ascribed to parents by older children.

- Siblings were associated with conflict and to a lesser extent with nurturance. As most siblings were approximately 2 years old, the fact that some children associated them with nurturance is understandable. The association of siblings with conflict, especially when contrasted with friends, may be a function of siblings' availability or the fact that sibling relationships are constant and therefore safe contexts for conflict and its resolution.

- The predominance of best friends as sources of instrumental help and power when siblings and friends were contrasted signals the hierarchical nature of sibling relationships.

- Overall, best friends and imaginary companions resembled each other in terms of social provisions, although imaginary companions were preferred for nurturance.

Social provisions and imaginary companions

Children with IFs and POs reported similarly in terms of the social provisions they associated with their imaginary companions, but children with POs consistently chose parents for every provision with the exception of nurturance in contrasts with POs.

Children with IFs were less consistent in their responses, possibly because of the ethereal nature of their companions as relationship partners, or perhaps because they were better able to contrast parents with other relationship partners than were the children with POs.

Table 1

Relationship partners chosen for social provisions by relationship contrast and group

Contrast	Conflict	Instrumental help	Nurturance	Power
Parent-Best friend				
Control	Parent/Best friend 7.62*	Parent 33.98***	Parent 10.61**	Parent 54.96***
IF	Best friend 17.07***	2.13, n.s.	3.24, n.s.	Parent 11.18**
PO	Parent 19.87***	Parent 41.87***	Parent 11.63**	Parent 61.07***
Parent-Sibling or IC				
Control	2.75, n.s.	Parent 37.56***	1.37, n.s.	Parent 25.85***
IF	1.91, n.s.	Parent 24.65***	IC 8.96*	2.75, n.s.
PO	Parent 9.33*	Parent 35.47***	IC 14.93**	Parent 34.67***
Best friend-Sibling or IC				
Control	Sibling 21.28***	Best friend 34.38***	2.74, n.s.	Best friend 21.43***
IF	3.04, n.s.	Best friend 12.33**	IC 6.97+	1.67, n.s.
PO	Best friend/IC 13.87**	Best friend/IC 8.67*	IC 15.67***	Best friend/IC 30.84***

$+p \leq .08$. $*p \leq .05$. $**p \leq .01$. $***p \leq .001$.

Note: Chi-square values were generated by comparing the distributions of children's relationship choices against a chance distribution. Insignificant *p* values indicated that the distribution of children's responses did not differ from chance using an *alpha* level of .05.

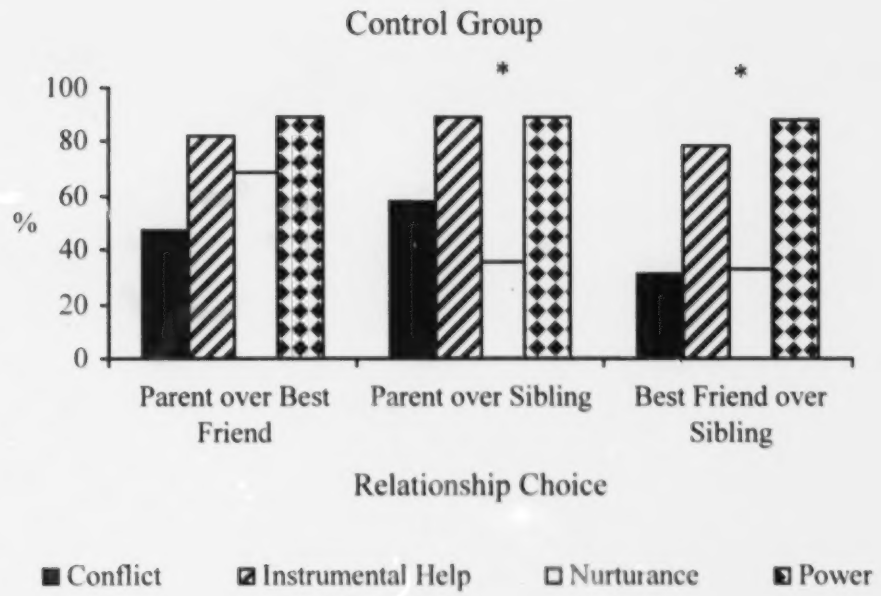
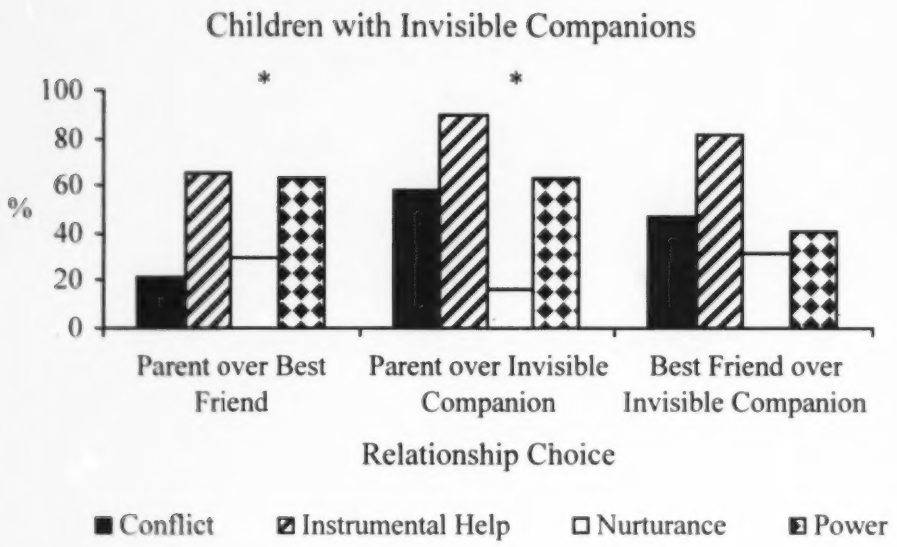
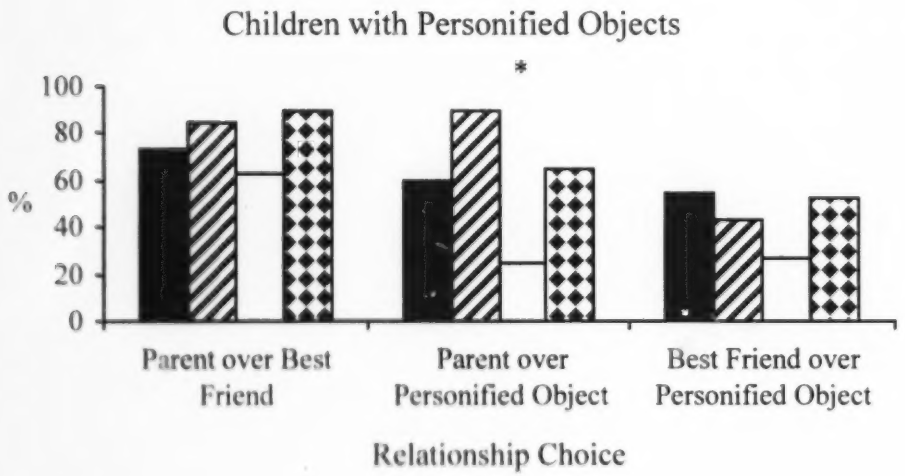


Figure 1. Proportion of children in the control group (n = 20) who chose parent (parent-best friend contrasts, parent-sibling contrasts) or best friend (best friend-sibling contrasts) for each social provision.

*Relationship contrasts in which the distributions of children's responses differed significantly when analyzed across all four social provisions at once.





Figures 2 & 3. Proportion of children with invisible companions (n = 20) and with personified objects (n = 20) who chose parent (parent-best friend contrasts, parent-imaginary companion contrasts) or best friend (best friend-imaginary companion contrasts) for each social provision.

*Relationship contrasts in which the distributions of children's responses differed significantly when analyzed across all four social provisions at once.